

# CHAPTER 1

## The Black Cat

– Edgar Allan Poe

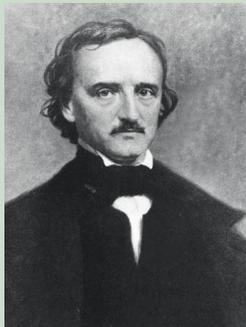
**This chapter focuses on the following:**

- Setting and atmosphere
- Characterization and types of characters
- Symbolism
- Language Focus: vivid and evocative adjectives
- The Language of Literature: foreshadowing and style
- Theme: thematic concepts and thematic statements

### Connect with the Text

- A.** Take stock of your opinions on the following questions. Discuss them with one or more partners.
1. Are you superstitious? Why do you think people believe in superstitions?
  2. What are some of the best-known examples of superstitions?
  3. What are some of the ingredients of a satisfying horror story or film?
  4. What places or settings do you associate with the scariest scenes in a horror story?
  5. Do you think people are always responsible for their actions? Why?
- B.** Do a web search for “temperance reform” and the “temperance movement” in the nineteenth century. Summarize the concept in a few sentences.

### Text in Context



Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849) was one of the most influential American writers of the nineteenth century. Although his works include many short stories, poetry, literary criticism essays and book reviews, he is remembered mostly for his tales of terror. Indeed, Poe transformed the horror story genre with his skilful tales of psychological depth and insight. Many of his stories can be situated in the Gothic literature current, also called dark romanticism, which blends elements of terror with romance, superstition, distress and supernatural events, and has a more philosophical core. In this genre the characters are developed to react as realistically as possible to situations that are unreal. Other examples of Gothic fiction include Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*. Like his writing, many aspects of Poe’s life remain mysterious. In great part, this is due to the biography written by Rufus Griswold, considered Poe’s literary adversary. Many of the facts he alleged proved to be unsubstantiated but persisted in the collective memory.

# Exploratory Reading

Read the text a first time without interruption. Keep an open mind and take a mental note of your reactions and observations. Soak up the mood and atmosphere without looking for any specific elements. When you are finished, answer the questions below the text.

## The Black Cat

Edgar Allan Poe

- 1 For the most wild, yet most **homely** narrative which I am about to pen, I neither expect nor solicit belief. Mad indeed would I be to expect it, in a case where my very senses reject their own evidence. Yet, mad am I not—and very surely do I not dream. But tomorrow I die, and to-day I would unburden my soul. My immediate purpose is to place before the world, plainly, succinctly, and without comment, a series of mere household events. In their consequences, these events have terrified—have tortured—have destroyed me. Yet I will not attempt to expound them. To me, they have presented little but horror—to many they will seem less terrible than baroques. Hereafter, perhaps, some intellect may be found which will reduce my phantasm to the commonplace—some intellect more calm, more logical, and far less excitable than my own, which will perceive, in the circumstances I detail with awe, nothing more than an ordinary succession of very natural causes and effects.
- 2 From my infancy I was noted for the docility and humanity of my disposition. My tenderness of heart was even so conspicuous as to make me the jest of my companions. I was especially fond of animals, and was indulged by my parents with a great variety of pets. With these I spent most of my time, and never was so happy as when feeding and caressing them. This peculiarity of character grew with my growth, and, in my manhood, I derived from it one of my principal sources of pleasure. To those who have cherished an affection for a faithful and **sagacious** dog, I need hardly be at the trouble of explaining the nature or the intensity of the gratification thus derivable. There is something in the unselfish and self-sacrificing love of a brute, which goes directly to the heart of him who has had frequent occasion to test the **paltry** friendship and gossamer fidelity of mere Man.
- 3 I married early, and was happy to find in my wife a disposition not **uncongenial** with my own. Observing my partiality for domestic pets, she lost no opportunity of procuring those of the most **agreeable** kind. We had birds, gold-fish, a fine dog, rabbits, a small monkey and a cat.
- 4 This latter was a remarkably large and beautiful animal, entirely black, and sagacious to an astonishing degree. In speaking of his intelligence, my wife, who at heart was not a little tinctured with superstition, made frequent allusion to the ancient popular notion, which regarded all black cats as witches in disguise. Not that she was ever serious upon this point—and I mention the matter at all for no better reason than that it happens, just now, to be remembered.
- 5 Pluto—this was the cat's name—was my favourite pet and playmate. I alone fed him, and he attended me wherever I went about the house. It was even with difficulty that I could prevent him from following me through the streets.
- 6 Our friendship lasted, in this manner, for several years, during which my general temperament and character—through the instrumentality of the fiend Intemperance—had (I blush to confess it) experienced a radical alteration for the worse. I grew, day by day, more moody, more irritable, more regardless of the feelings of others. I suffered myself to use intemperate language to my wife. At length, I even offered her personal violence. My pets, of course, were made to feel the change in my disposition. I not only neglected, but ill-used them. For Pluto, however, I still retained sufficient regard to restrain me from maltreating him, as I made no scruple of maltreating the rabbits, the monkey, or even the dog, when by accident, or through affection, they came in my way. But my disease grew upon me—for what disease is like Alcohol?—and at length even Pluto, who was now becoming old, and consequently somewhat **peevish**—even Pluto began to experience the effects of my ill temper.
- 7 One night, returning home, much intoxicated, from one of my haunts about town, I fancied that the cat avoided my presence. I seized him; when, in his fright at my violence, he inflicted a slight wound upon my hand with his teeth. The fury of a demon instantly possessed me. I knew myself no longer. My original soul seemed, at once, to take its flight from my body; and a more than **fiendish** malevolence, gin-nurtured,

thrilled every fibre of my frame. I took from my waistcoat pocket a pen-knife, opened it, grasped the poor beast by the throat, and deliberately cut one of its eyes from the socket! I blush, I burn, I shudder, while I pen the damnable atrocity.

8 When reason returned with the morning—when I had slept off the fumes of the night’s debauch—I experienced a sentiment half of horror, half of remorse, for the crime of which I had been guilty; but it was, at best, a feeble and equivocal feeling, and the soul remained untouched. I again plunged into excess, and soon drowned in wine all memory of the deed.

9 In the meantime the cat slowly recovered. The socket of the lost eye presented, it is true, a frightful appearance, but he no longer appeared to suffer any pain. He went about the house as usual, but, as might be expected, fled in extreme terror at my approach. I had so much of my old heart left, as to be at first grieved by this evident dislike on the part of a creature which had once so loved me. But this feeling soon gave place to irritation. And then came, as if to my final and irrevocable overthrow, the spirit of Perverseness. Of this spirit philosophy takes no account. Yet I am not more sure that my soul lives, than I am that perverseness is one of the primitive impulses of the human heart—one of the indivisible primary faculties, or sentiments, which give direction to the character of man. Who has not, a hundred times, found himself committing a **vile** or a silly action, for no other reason than because he knows he should not? Have we not a perpetual inclination, in the teeth of our best judgment, to violate that which is Law, merely because we understand it to be such? This spirit of perverseness, I say, came to my final overthrow. It was this unfathomable longing of the soul to vex itself—to offer violence to its own nature—to do wrong for the wrong’s sake only—that urged me to continue and finally to consummate the injury I had inflicted upon the unoffending brute. One morning, in cool blood, I slipped a noose about its neck and hung it to the limb of a tree—hung it with the tears streaming from my eyes, and with the bitterest remorse at my heart—hung it because I knew that it had loved me, and because I felt it had given me no reason of offence—hung it because I knew that in so doing I was committing a sin—a deadly sin that would so jeopardize my immortal soul as to place it—if such a thing were possible—even beyond the reach of the infinite mercy of the Most Merciful and Most Terrible God.

10 On the night of the day on which this cruel deed was done, I was aroused from sleep by the cry of “Fire!”

The curtains of my bed were in flames. The whole house was blazing. It was with great difficulty that my wife, a servant, and myself, made our escape from the conflagration. The destruction was complete. My entire worldly wealth was swallowed up, and I resigned myself thenceforward to despair.

11 I am above the weakness of seeking to establish a sequence of cause and effect between the disaster and the atrocity. But I am detailing a chain of facts, and wish not to leave even a possible link imperfect. On the day succeeding the fire, I visited the ruins. The walls, with one exception, had fallen in. This exception was found in a compartment wall, not very thick, which stood about the middle of the house, and against which had rested the head of my bed. The plastering had here, in great measure, resisted the action of the fire—a fact which I attributed to its having been recently spread. About this wall a dense crowd were collected, and many persons seemed to be examining a particular portion of it with every minute and eager attention. The words “strange!” “singular!” and other similar expressions, excited my curiosity. I approached and saw, as if graven in bas-relief upon the white surface, the figure of a gigantic cat. The impression was given with an accuracy truly marvellous. There was a rope about the animal’s neck.

12 When I first beheld this apparition—for I could scarcely regard it as less—my wonder and my terror were extreme. But at length reflection came to my aid. The cat, I remembered, had been hung in a garden adjacent to the house. Upon the alarm of fire, this garden had been immediately filled by the crowd—by some one of whom the animal must have been cut from the tree and thrown, through an open window, into my chamber. This had probably been done with the view of arousing me from sleep. The falling of other walls had compressed the victim of my cruelty into the substance of the freshly-spread plaster; the lime of which, with the flames and the ammonia from the carcass, had then accomplished the portraiture as I saw it.

13 Although I thus readily accounted to my reason, if not altogether to my conscience, for the startling fact just detailed, it did not the less fail to make a deep impression upon my fancy. For months I could not rid myself of the phantasm of the cat; and, during this period, there came back into my spirit a half-sentiment that seemed, but was not, remorse. I went so far as to regret the loss of the animal, and to look about me, among the vile haunts which I now habitually frequented, for another pet of the same species, and of somewhat similar appearance, with which to supply its place.

14 One night as I sat, half stupefied, in a den of more than infamy, my attention was suddenly drawn to some black object, reposing upon the head of one of the immense hogsheads of gin, or of rum, which constituted the chief furniture of the apartment. I had been looking steadily at the top of this hogshead for some minutes, and what now caused me surprise was the fact that I had not sooner perceived the object thereupon. I approached it, and touched it with my hand. It was a black cat—a very large one—fully as large as Pluto, and closely resembling him in every respect but one. Pluto had not a white hair upon any portion of his body; but this cat had a large, although indefinite, splotch of white, covering nearly the whole region of the breast.

15 Upon my touching him, he immediately arose, purred loudly, rubbed against my hand, and appeared delighted with my notice. This, then, was the very creature of which I was in search. I at once offered to purchase it of the landlord; but this person made no claim to it—knew nothing of it—had never seen it before.

16 I continued my caresses, and when I prepared to go home, the animal evinced a disposition to accompany me. I permitted it to do so; occasionally stooping and patting it as I proceeded. When it reached the house it domesticated itself at once, and became immediately a great favourite with my wife.

17 For my own part, I soon found a dislike to it arising within me. This was just the reverse of what I had anticipated; but—I know not how or why it was—its evident fondness for myself rather disgusted and annoyed me. By slow degrees, these feelings of disgust and annoyance rose into the bitterness of hatred. I avoided the creature; a certain sense of shame, and the remembrance of my former deed of cruelty, preventing me from physically abusing it. I did not, for some weeks, strike, or otherwise violently ill-use it; but gradually—very gradually—I came to look upon it with unutterable loathing, and to flee silently from its **odious** presence, as from the breath of a pestilence.

18 What added, no doubt, to my hatred of the beast, was the discovery, on the morning after I brought it home, that, like Pluto, it also had been deprived of one of its eyes. This circumstance, however, only endeared it to my wife, who, as I have already said, possessed, in a high degree, that humanity of feeling which had once been my distinguishing trait, and the source of many of my simplest and purest pleasures.

19 With my aversion to this cat, however, its partiality for myself seemed to increase. It followed my footsteps with a pertinacity which it would be difficult to make

the reader comprehend. Whenever I sat, it would crouch beneath my chair, or spring upon my knees, covering me with its loathsome caresses. If I arose to walk, it would get between my feet, and thus nearly throw me down, or, fastening its long and sharp claws in my dress, clamber, in this manner, to my breast. At such times, although I longed to destroy it with a blow, I was yet withheld from so doing, partly by a memory of my former crime, but chiefly—let me confess it at once—by absolute dread of the beast.

20 This dread was not exactly a dread of physical evil—and yet I should be at a loss how otherwise to define it. I am almost ashamed to own—yes, even in this felon's cell, I am almost ashamed to own—that the terror and horror with which the animal inspired me, had been heightened by one of the merest chimeras it would be possible to conceive. My wife had called my attention, more than once, to the character of the mark of white hair, of which I have spoken, and which constituted the sole visible difference between the strange beast and the one I had destroyed. The reader will remember that this mark, although large, had been originally very indefinite; but, by slow degrees—degrees nearly imperceptible, and which for a long time my reason struggled to reject as fanciful—it had, at length, assumed a rigorous distinctness of outline. It was now the representation of an object that I shudder to name—and for this, above all, I loathed, and dreaded, and would have rid myself of the monster had I dared—it was now, I say, the image of a hideous—of a **ghastly** thing—of the Gallows!—oh, mournful and terrible engine of horror and of crime—of agony and of death!

21 And now was I indeed wretched beyond the wretchedness of mere humanity. And a brute beast—whose fellow I had contemptuously destroyed—a brute beast to work out for me—for me, a man, fashioned in the image of the High God—so much of insufferable woe! Alas! neither by day nor by night knew I the blessing of rest any more! During the former the creature left me no moment alone; and, in the latter, I started, hourly, from dreams of unutterable fear, to find the hot breath of the thing upon my face, and its vast weight—an incarnate nightmare that I had no power to shake off—incumbent eternally upon my heart!

22 Beneath the pressure of torments such as these, the feeble remnant of the good within me succumbed. Evil thoughts became my sole intimates—the darkest and most evil of thoughts. The moodiness of my usual temper increased to hatred of all things and of all mankind; while, from the sudden, frequent and

- ungovernable outbursts of a fury to which I now blindly abandoned myself, my uncomplaining wife, alas! was the most usual and the most patient of sufferers.
- 23 One day she accompanied me, upon some household errand, into the cellar of the old building which our poverty compelled us to inhabit. The cat followed me down the steep stairs, and, nearly throwing me headlong, exasperated me to madness. Uplifting an axe, and forgetting, in my wrath, the childish dread which had hitherto stayed my hand, I aimed a blow at the animal which, of course, would have proved instantly fatal had it descended as I wished. But this blow was arrested by the hand of my wife. Goaded, by the interference, into a rage more than demoniacal, I withdrew my arm from her grasp, and buried the axe in her brain. She fell dead upon the spot, without a groan.
- 24 This hideous murder accomplished, I set myself forthwith, and with entire deliberation, to the task of concealing the body. I knew that I could not remove it from the house, either by day or by night, without the risk of being observed by the neighbours. Many projects entered my mind. At one period I thought of cutting the corpse into minute fragments, and destroying them by fire. At another, I resolved to dig a grave for it in the floor of the cellar. Again, I deliberated about casting it in the well in the yard—about packing it in a box, as if merchandise, with the usual arrangements, and so getting a porter to take it from the house. Finally I hit upon what I considered a far better expedient than either of these. I determined to wall it up in the cellar—as the monks of the Middle Ages recorded to have walled up their victims.
- 25 For a purpose such as this the cellar was well adapted. Its walls were loosely constructed, and had lately been plastered throughout with a rough plaster, which the dampness of the atmosphere had prevented from hardening. Moreover, in one of the walls was a projection, caused by a false chimney, or fireplace, that had been filled up, and made to resemble the rest of the cellar. I made no doubt that I could readily displace the bricks at this point, insert the corpse, and wall the whole up as before, so that no eye could detect anything suspicious.
- 26 And in this calculation I was not deceived. By means of a crowbar I easily dislodged the bricks, and, having carefully deposited the body against the inner wall, I propped it in that position, while, with little trouble, I relaid the whole structure as it originally stood. Having procured mortar, sand, and hair, with every possible precaution, I prepared a plaster which could not be distinguished from the old, and with this I very carefully went over the new brickwork. When I had finished, I felt satisfied that all was right. The wall did not present the slightest appearance of having been disturbed. The rubbish on the floor was picked up with the minutest care. I looked around triumphantly, and said to myself, “Here at least, then, my labour has not been in vain.”
- 27 My next step was to look for the beast which had been the cause of so much wretchedness; for I had, at length, firmly resolved to put it to death. Had I been able to meet with it, at the moment, there could have been no doubt of its fate; but it appeared that the crafty animal had been alarmed at the violence of my previous anger, and forebore to present itself in my present mood. It is impossible to describe, or to imagine, the deep, the blissful sense of relief which the absence of the detested creature occasioned in my bosom. It did not make its appearance during the night—and thus for one night at least, since its introduction into the house, I soundly and tranquilly slept; aye, slept even with the burden of murder upon my soul!
- 28 The second and the third day passed, and still my tormentor came not. Once again I breathed as a free man. The monster, in terror, had fled the premises forever! I should behold it no more! My happiness was supreme! The guilt of my dark deed disturbed me but little. Some few inquiries had been made, but these had been readily answered. Even a search had been instituted—but of course nothing was to be discovered. I looked upon my future felicity as secured.
- 29 Upon the fourth day of the assassination, a party of the police came, very unexpectedly, into the house, and proceeded again to make rigorous investigation of the premises. Secure, however, in the inscrutability of my place of concealment, I felt no embarrassment whatever. The officers bade me accompany them in their search. They left no nook or corner unexplored. At length, for the third or fourth time, they descended into the cellar. I quivered not in a muscle. My heart beat calmly as that of one who slumbers in innocence. I walked the cellar from end to end. I folded my arms upon my bosom, and roamed easily to and fro. The police were thoroughly satisfied, and prepared to depart. The glee at my heart was too strong to be restrained. I burned to say if but one word, by way of triumph, and to render doubly sure their assurance of my guiltlessness.
- 30 “Gentlemen,” I said at last, as the party ascended the steps, “I delight to have allayed your suspicions. I wish you all health, and a little more courtesy. By-the-by, gentlemen, this—this is a very well-constructed

house.” (In the rabid desire to say something easily, I scarcely knew what I uttered at all.) “I may say an excellently well-constructed house. These walls—are you going, gentlemen?—these walls are solidly put together;” and here, through the mere frenzy of bravado, I rapped heavily, with a cane which I held in my hand, upon that very portion of the brickwork behind which stood the corpse of the wife of my bosom.

31 But may God shield and deliver me from the fangs of the Arch-Fiend! No sooner had the reverberation of my blows sunk into silence, than I was answered by a voice from within the tomb!—by a cry, at first muffled and broken, like the sobbing of a child, and then quickly swelling into one long, loud, and continuous scream, utterly anomalous and inhuman—a howl—a wailing shriek, half of horror and half of triumph, such as might have arisen only out of hell, conjointly from the throats of the damned in their agony and of the demons that exult in the damnation.

32 Of my own thoughts it is folly to speak. Swooning, I staggered to the opposite wall. For one instant the party upon the stairs remained motionless, through extremity of terror and of awe. In the next, a dozen stout arms were toiling at the wall. It fell bodily. The corpse, already greatly decayed and clotted with gore, stood erect before the eyes of the spectators. Upon its head, with red extended mouth and solitary eye of fire, sat the hideous beast whose craft had seduced me into murder, and whose informing voice had consigned me to the hangman. I had walled the monster up within the tomb!

(3913 words)

Source: Poe, E. A. “The Black Cat.” *United States Saturday Post*, 19 Aug. 1843, poestories.com/read/blackcat.

## Initial Insight

1. What is the story about? Write down anything that intuitively comes to you.

*Answers will vary.*

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2. How would you describe the narrator of the story?

*Answers will vary, but students will most likely not sympathize with the narrator, who may be described as violent or struggling with mental illness.*

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When debriefing as a class, it is possible to group the students’ answers in different categories relating to plot, characters, setting, etc. These answers can also be used as a springboard to elicit a class discussion. Apart from factual accounts, common answers may include thematic concepts such as (domestic) violence, alcoholism, animal abuse, madness, etc.

## Reader’s Response

Consider the following questions. Discuss your answers with one or more partners.

1. What are some of the controversial elements and events in the story? Are they necessary to further the storyline?
2. What emotional response(s) or reaction(s) did these events evoke in you?
3. What sort of impression did the narrator make on you?
4. Beyond “unburden[ing his] soul,” why do you think the narrator might write down and share his story?
5. Do you think some of the story’s inexplicable elements, such as the imprint of Pluto on the narrator’s bedroom wall after the fire, are supernatural, or is there some logical explanation, as the narrator suggests?
6. Does the story end the way you expected? How? Why?

# LANGUAGE FOCUS

The author uses vivid adjectives that go beyond mere description to evoke the intensity of his moral evaluation of the thing or person being described. Refer to the context, and use a reputable unilingual dictionary to define the following words (identified in bold) as they are used in the text. Pay attention to the value judgment they imply; is it positive or negative, and to what degree?

1. homely (par. 1): plain, not very attractive
2. sagacious (par. 2): able to understand and judge things very well; wise
3. paltry (par. 2): unimportant, worthless
4. uncongenial (par. 3): unpleasant in a way that makes you feel uncomfortable
5. agreeable (par. 3): pleasant
6. peevish (par. 6): easily annoyed
7. fiendish (par. 7): cruel and unpleasant
8. vile (par. 9): extremely unpleasant or bad
9. odious (par. 17): extremely unpleasant, horrible
10. ghastly (par. 20): upsetting, frightening

Look up any other words you are unsure of.



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The Black Cat > Vocabulary  
Comprehension

## Close Reading

As you read the text again, pay attention to elements that seem significant to understanding and interpreting the story. The following guided reading questions will help you.

1. What type of narrator does this story have?
  - a) First-person narrator (the protagonist)
  - b) First-person narrator (an onlooker or secondary character)
  - c) Third-person narrator (omniscient point of view)
  - d) Third-person narrator (limited point of view)
2. From where does the narrator share his story?  
A prison cell (felon's cell)
3. From which peculiarity of character does the narrator say he draws one of his principal sources of pleasure?  
His love for animals
4. How does the narrator define the spirit of perverseness?  
The desire to do wrong for wrong's sake ("committing a vile or a silly action, for no other reason than because he knows he should not")

Asking students whether they believe all of the events recounted by the narrator are entirely true will prime them to pay attention to the construct of the unreliable narrator.

5. How does the narrator “consummate” Pluto’s injury? What is a synonym of “consummate” in this context?

He hangs Pluto from a tree. To consummate means “to finish, to complete.”

6. What does the narrator find many people examining in the ruins of his house?

A section of wall that appears to be engraved with the figure of a cat

7. What is the only difference between the second cat and Pluto? How is this an important detail?

The cat has an undefined white patch on the chest. According to the narrator, this patch changes to take the shape of gallows.

8. How does the narrator feel about the second cat, and why does he feel this way?

He feels an aversion, even hatred, because the cat reminds him too much of Pluto, and because it seeks attention and wants to be close to him.

9. How does the narrator feel in the aftermath of the murder in the basement?

- a) He feels the heavy burden of guilt weighing down his soul.
- b) He feels furious with the world and descends into a dark rage.
- c) He feels nothing ever again.
- d) He sleeps tranquilly and feels free and happy.

10. What causes the police to start tearing down the wall? Who or what do they find behind it?

A long, inhuman scream (made by the cat). They find the corpse of the narrator’s wife and the cat, alive.



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Additional Questions

## THE LANGUAGE OF LITERATURE

The effect of any text is to a very large extent determined by the author’s diction and use of figures of speech and other literary devices. Use the following questions to focus your attention on how the author uses language in the story.

- A. Foreshadowing** is a literary device used to generate tension by presaging later plot events. It gives the reader a clue of what is to come—for instance, through the use of imagery, dialogue or symbols. In “The Black Cat,” the image of a hanging at the gallows is evoked three times. First, identify these three recurrences in the text. Then, discuss how they serve as a foreshadowing technique.
- B.** Poe uses **style** to contribute to the construction of the narrator’s character. The story features a heavy use of dashes to create long, cumbersome sentences as the narrator voices his thoughts. What does this use of **syntax** reveal about the narrator?
- C.** Another element of style concerns the narrator’s **capitalization** of certain nouns, such as Fiend Intemperance, Alcohol, Horror and Perverseness. What is the immediate impact of capitalizing a noun? What does it suggest about the narrator’s view of these words?
- D.** In the following excerpt from the penultimate paragraph, underline two similes. Discuss how they illustrate the narrator’s state of mind.

Answers to these questions are provided in My eLab Documents.

I was answered by a voice from within the tomb!—by a cry, at first muffled and broken, like the sobbing of a child, and then quickly swelling into ... a wailing shriek, half of horror and half of triumph, such as might have arisen only out of hell, conjointly from the throats of the damned in their agony and of the demons that exult in the damnation.

## Analytical Reading

Answers to all the Analytical Reading questions are provided in My eLab Documents.

After making specific observations, you are ready to analyze the subject of your close reading. The following questions will help you look for thematic patterns, establish relationships and identify specific examples of literary devices or principles.

1. In this story, Poe provides few details about **setting**. In contrast with many of his stories featuring intricate imagery, this story focuses more on the action of the main character. That said, the atmosphere changes as the setting of the story shifts. First, draw on the narrator's account to describe each of the following settings in one or two sentences.

Setting	Description / Atmosphere
The narrator's first home	At first, this is a happy home. The family is relatively rich; they have a servant. Their house also has a garden. Slowly, this house becomes a prison for the narrator's wife and animals, until there is a fire.
The second house	The second house is old and much more modest; poverty and despair have taken over from any happiness left. At first, the narrator no longer has any animals.
The bar (den) where the second cat is found	A grimy place of infamy with no furniture other than casks of gin and rum
The cellar	The cellar is a damp space with loosely constructed walls and no floor covering. By definition, it is also underground, which can act as a symbol.
The prison cell	Nothing is said about this space, other than that it confines the narrator while he awaits his hanging.

Explain the change in atmosphere you observe and what it may signify.

2. The story's **plot** is articulated around four types of **conflict**. For each conflict, explain in one or two sentences how it is illustrated in the story. Underline a passage in the text that supports your explanation and write the number of the paragraph(s) where the passage can be found. Then, determine which conflict holds the most importance.

**a.** Character vs. human

Explanation: The narrator ends up killing his wife.

Paragraph(s) containing a support passage: 23, 24

All of these questions could be answered individually in writing, discussed in pairs or even taken up as an active learning assignment in small groups. If taken up in writing, the answers could take the form of a traditional question-answer format, a reading journal or even a blog.

**b. Character vs. nature**

Explanation: The narrator mistreats animals (cats).

Paragraph(s) containing a support passage: 9

**c. Character vs. self**

Explanation: The narrator struggles with alcoholism, rage, madness and guilt. His most important battle is the one against himself.

Paragraph(s) containing a support passage: 9

**d. Character vs. society**

Explanation: The narrator is arrested by the police and tried for the murder of his wife. He is waiting to be hanged.

Paragraph(s) containing a support passage: 29

The conflict that is most important in the story is:

character vs. self

**3.** Explain how the causal relationship that exists between the story’s most important conflict and the other three types of conflict help the reader understand the story on a deeper level.

**4.** As the story develops, does the narrator change, and if so, how? Does that make him a **static** or **dynamic character**? Is he **flat** or **round**? Provide evidence from the story to support your claims.

**5. Active characters** move the story along by consciously making changes to their surroundings. **Passive characters** mostly undergo the changes going on around them—which does not mean they do not complete any actions at all. Characters may be active in some ways and passive in others, or they may change from one to the other as the story progresses.

Determine if each of the four main characters in “The Black Cat” is active, passive or both. Support each box you check with evidence from the story. Once you have completed the table, discuss your choices and evidence with one or more partners.

Character	Character Type	Evidence
Narrator	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Active <input type="checkbox"/> Passive	The narrator mistreats then kills Pluto. He takes the second cat home, starts hating it, kills his wife and wants to kill the cat.
Wife	<input type="checkbox"/> Active <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Passive	She stays with her husband in spite of his growingly erratic behaviour. Though she does try to prevent his murder of the second cat, she ultimately gets murdered herself.
Pluto	<input type="checkbox"/> Active <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Passive	Gets an eye cut out. Gets hanged.

Character	Character Type	Evidence
Second cat	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Active <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Passive	It is active because it follows the narrator home, inflicts nightmares upon him and causes him to go mad. It is passive because it acts like a normal cat, simply seeking attention and affection.

6. An **unreliable narrator** tells the reader a story that cannot be taken at face value because he or she displays characteristics that undermine their credibility. Is the narrator reliable or unreliable? Why?
7. The **thematic concepts** below are central to “The Black Cat.” Explain how they manifest themselves in the story. Pay attention to the specific way(s) in which each one is taken up. Is there a progression? Support your explanations with evidence from the text.

Violence                      Freedom vs. confinement                      Love and hatred  
Alcohol                      Psychological transformation

## Food for Thought

The following questions encourage you to turn a critical eye to your earlier observations and analyses. They introduce elements and considerations that will lead you to formulate new questions and set tentative hypotheses. Discuss these to further your insight into the text.

- After analyzing the story, look back at its title. The title only references one black cat. Does this mean that there is only one cat in the story? What hypotheses can you put forward? Support each hypothesis with evidence from the text.
- The narrator pretends that he never had any troubles until he began drinking alcohol, yet there is evidence in the story that alcohol is not the only thing to blame for his sociopathic actions. Describe other details the reader knows about the narrator that likely contribute to his slide into violence and insanity.
- How does the narrative fit in with the temperance movement?
- There are two types of blindness on display in this story. The two cats are partially blind, but the narrator also suffers from a sort of blindness. How so? Explain.
- Poe rarely named characters in his stories, so when he did give them names, this should be considered of importance to the story. Do a web search for “Pluto + Greek mythology” and explain the possible symbolism of this name.
- The character of Pluto also shows striking similarities with Odin in Norse mythology. Do a web search to find which three characteristics Pluto shares with Odin. What might this suggest in regard to the second cat? Paraphrase information in your own words. Remember to record your sources, so you can use them as references, should you decide to include this information in an essay or presentation. (Refer to the Referencing and Plagiarism section on pages 289–291 for more details.)
- Refer to the Text in Context section on page 14 or do a web search to pinpoint the most common features of Gothic fiction. Then, try to find an example from the text to illustrate each of these features. Work in a small group; put together and compare what you have found in order to present one complete list of features, with the most eloquent examples.

You can assign the Food for Thought questions as speaking or writing activities (formally or informally).

Answers to these questions are provided in My eLab Documents.

Questions 5 and 6 are more challenging but lead to rich activities requiring some research and deep thinking. To make the activity easier, you may wish to guide students or provide them with a specific web resource.

Rob Green’s 1995 short film adaptation of “The Black Cat” is particularly evocative in its sober rendering of the story and effectively allows students to see, hear and feel the narrator’s fall into madness. It is available on YouTube.

# Presenting an Analysis

## Writing | Analyzing the Construction of Theme

Write a literary analysis essay around a thesis statement focusing on the construction of theme(s) in “The Black Cat.” For instance, you may wish to analyze how a particular symbol or image recurs throughout the story to evoke one or more of the themes identified in the Analytical Reading section. You can also analyze how the different types of conflicts contribute to this theme/these themes. Make sure you investigate the themes specific to the story (thematic statements) rather than the thematic concepts that underpin them.

### Example:

In “The Black Cat,” Edgar Allan Poe underscores the narrator’s descent into madness by setting the story in physical spaces that gradually deteriorate as the story progresses.

In the body paragraphs, use an analysis structure to provide evidence and examples from the text to point out the use of one of your selected elements and its role in the construction of your chosen theme(s). Refer to the work you did in the Analytical Reading section. Make sure to provide clear examples from the text to illustrate and support your analysis.

(Refer to Part V, Writing about Literature, on page 271 for more information on essay format and structure.)

## Speaking | Presenting a Character Analysis

In order to explain their role, purpose and meaning within the storyline, present a character analysis of the narrator, the black cat(s) or the wife. The following questions may guide you; however, you should give a cohesive presentation that is not a mere addition to the answers to each question. As with an essay, focus on a central thesis that you break up into smaller topics.

- What are the character’s most important physical and psychological traits?
- Is the character (mostly) flat or round, dynamic or static?
- Is the character (mostly) active or passive?
- What type(s) of conflict is the character involved in?
- Does the character or any of its actions represent a symbol?
- How does the character fit into the theme(s) of the story?

(Refer to Appendix 2 on page 297 for more information on presentation format and structure.)



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